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ABSTRACT

This document is a narrative of one experienced English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher's struggle to improve the English language learning skills of her beginning level students. She found this difficult to do in a situation where the learners spent only 4 hours a week in class, and only 2 of those in her class. Rather than focus on how to do more to help the students learn English, the teacher decided to change strategies and see what she could do to help them take more of the responsibility for learning and thus increase their capacity to learn. The teacher turned to works such as Rebecca Oxford's research on language learning strategies and O'Malley and Chamot's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). The article goes on to describe the teacher's efforts to ascertain what language learning strategies were typically used by her beginning level adult English language learners. She found that her students were resourceful strategists in the classroom and appreciated the opportunity to discuss openly various learning strategies. She found a variety of strategies in use, namely: socially-oriented strategies; resourcing strategies; strategies based on prior knowledge and experience; and repetition and coping strategies. It is concluded that knowing about and understanding the learning strategies of the learners allows the teacher to make more informed decisions about what instructional strategies are likely to be the most effective. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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The Plot Thickens: Beginning Level English Language Learners as Strategists

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The Plot Thickens: Beginning Level English Language Learners as Strategists

MaryAnn Cunningham Florez, St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church

Background

"I've got to do more to teach them English!" Every Tuesday night, I watched my beginning level English language learners take their seats in our classroom and this thought hounded me. I was very concerned that my learners spent only four hours per week — two hours in my class and two hours in another teacher's class — in targeted English language development and practice. As an experienced English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I knew this limited time presented an additional challenge to learners at the very beginning stages of learning English. As Spanish speakers, they were literate in their native language, but if they were able to read, write, and speak in English at all, their skills were limited. Most had busy lives with families and multiple jobs, and most lived and worked in contexts where they could often circumvent regular English language use. I needed to find a way to make the two hours they spent with me more productive, and ideally, I needed to extend learning beyond the classroom.

Initially, I tried some of the usual instructional recourses: small out-of-class projects or extension activities, worksheets, short readings, and simple writing tasks for homework. But with the instability of my class composition (erratic attendance coupled with frequent last minute incorporation of learners from other classes) and the lack of time my learners had to devote to work outside of class, I was usually more frustrated than satisfied with the efforts. I began to realize that it was not simply a case of what more I could do, but what more we could do. I had assumed sole responsibility for the learning process. I had forgotten my belief in the agency of the learners themselves and in their responsibility for learning. I changed my battle cry to the question, "How can I help my learners do more?"

My thoughts then turned to the incorporation of learning strategies in my English language instruction. Works such as Rebecca Oxford's research on language learning strategies and O'Malley and Chamot's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) had influenced me in valuing learning strategies and their development. Focusing on the actions learners take to support and advance their language learning — their learning strategies — seemed appropriate. I hoped that by drawing learners' attention to learning strategies, we could develop language learning tools that they could use not only in class but in the course of their regular daily activities. I also hoped that the process would empower learners to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Inquiry

What language learning strategies do beginning level English language learners use?

Action

My first instinct was to begin selecting and incorporating learning strategies in my beginning level ESL instruction, with the aim of then observing their effects and evaluating what works best. But as I thought more about the project and the fact that I usually try to be guided by the learners themselves in instructional planning, I felt it might be more valuable to look at what strategies my learners were already using. It seemed logical to me to find out what the learners were already doing and how they were approaching language learning before taking any specific actions. I was not finding any information in the existing literature on language learning strategies. Most research seemed to

be done with higher-level learners, usually in more academically-oriented programs. There were no hints about the language learning strategies that might be used by beginning level English language learners in an ESL program that focused primarily on life skills and oral language development. I decided that I could make decisions related to instruction later. What I needed to do first was collect data that concentrated on understanding what my learners were already doing.

Data Collection

I originally decided on a data collection plan that would combine direct observation of my learners and discussion with them as the means of pulling together insights on the language learning strategies that they used. (My learner population fluctuated weekly, but I had a core group of three women and three men between the ages of 19 and 55 who attended regularly.) I developed an outline of activities spanning a period from January to March. I focused on three specific data collection tools:

- Direct observation in my classroom of learner behavior (two hours, once a week over the three-month period).
- Direct observation of the same learners, but in a class taught on another night by a different teacher (at least two two-hour classes would be observed).
- Think-alouds with individual learners allowing them to describe their thought processes and actions in completing a learning task.

I was very concerned about the impact that this plan would have on the time and concentration I devoted to my learners and their learning. I did not want the few hours per week that we spent together to be diminished by the distraction of my research. I also knew that asking the learners to volunteer extra time was unrealistic. Therefore, I tried to select methods that I could use while teaching. I felt that this plan would provide me with the depth and breadth of information necessary without completely disrupting the learning that we needed to accomplish. I presented the plan to my learners. We discussed it in Spanish, as they did not have the language skills to talk about such concepts in English. They were interested in the concept of learning strategies and were excited that I would be asking their opinions and using their strategies as examples in my research.

As the research progressed, I found that I had to make some adjustments to my original plan. After three classes were cancelled, I realized that think-alouds with individuals would consume too much time and energy in the class periods. I replaced them with a set of debriefing questions that learners answered in a group discussion after completing a learning task. Also, I was only able to observe them in their other class on one occasion. I did, however, regularly observe and take notes in my own classes over the three-month period, and I periodically wrote reflective notes after classes, which I had not originally planned. I also included in my data the notes from an impromptu discussion with my learners on language strategies. I was initially disappointed that I was unable to adhere to my plan, but in analyzing the data, I found that I still had obtained a great deal of information.

Findings

What I found as a result of my data collection was that my beginning level ESL learners were active, resourceful strategists in the classroom. They took a variety of specific actions to support or facilitate their learning of English, which is how I defined language learning strategies for this project. Even more interesting, they understood and valued strategies and could identify and discuss strategy use. As Mauricio said in the course of a discussion of language learning strategies, "Yes, thank you, miss. Strategies are important. We need these things to learn English."

Some of the strategies exhibited, such as predicting or self-monitoring and checking, fit into categories established in current literature; many did not. Rather than force my learners' strategies into existing categories, I identified strategy groups that emerged from the data collected:

- socially-oriented strategies;
- resourcing strategies;
- strategies based on prior experience or knowledge;
- repetition strategies; and
- coping strategies.

Socially-oriented strategies were those that utilized social interaction or interpersonal relationships as a means for supporting language learning. When Marina consulted Adriana on the answer to a question, or Marco and Mauricio pushed their desks together to complete what was intended as an individual task, I categorized this as a socially-oriented

strategy. Offering a description of supporting context when a fellow learner was stymied by a word or concept, giving or receiving a translation, and checking or confirming completed work with a classmate were also examples of this type of strategy. Learners were constantly proposing, confirming, and negotiating meanings and answers to questions. Socially-oriented strategies were the most often utilized strategies, usually the first choice both in terms of what I observed and what learners reported as their preference when discussing strategy use.

Resourcing strategies: When I asked my learners, "When you're in class, what's the first thing you do when you come upon a word that you don't know?" their immediate responses were, "Ask you [the teacher]" and "Look in a dictionary." Using a dictionary, consulting notes or textbooks, consulting a native English speaker, and using context, pictures, or other cues to discover meaning were all ways in which I observed learners using other sources of information to determine or clarify items that they did not know or understand.

Strategies based on prior experience or knowledge is a broad category. It included many examples of individuals or the group tapping prior experiences and knowledge to grasp concepts. It also encompassed various uses of Spanish, such as translating between Spanish and English, drawing comparisons or identifying relationships between the two languages, and using cognates.

Repetition strategies: "Repeat the word 3 times. Then I repeat it 3 times. When you say the word in class and repeat and repeat it, this is the best for me to learn it. Thank you so much for this." Julia told me this in one of the earliest classes in this project, and I found that this use of repetition (repeating orally, copying, or writing and rewriting words or phrases) as a means of learning and remembering words, phrases, and pronunciation was universal for my learners. Learners would regularly repeat words to me, to other learners, or to themselves in the course of the class. They would copy material written on the chalkboard, even if they had written the words before or if the words were already on a worksheet. Marco asked that we always write answers from homework and worksheets on the chalkboard so that they could have another opportunity to write them and see them written; others agreed with him.

Coping strategies emerged as a strategy group after much consideration on my part. I hesitated at first to call them strategies because they were related to affective elements such as self-esteem, self-confidence, willingness to take risks, and motivation. Examples included individually and collectively laughing off mistakes; validating and reassuring each other by admitting shared difficulties; discussing experiences with and reactions to language use or U.S. culture; or sharing memories and cultural traditions with each other and with me. I was convinced that they were strategies when I noticed patterns of use actually emerging, such as diffusing uncomfortable situations, building up the confidence of a struggling classmate, or taking a break from the strain of listening to and producing English.

Implications and Future Directions

Knowing now that my learners do indeed use language learning strategies, and being able to identify at least some of their patterns and preferences in that use, I can now make more informed decisions about my own instructional practices. For this group of learners, I can create activities and learning structures that allow them to negotiate, consult, and collaborate. I can help them identify and reflect upon the strategies they already use, such as predicting or using context or repetition, and provide learning opportunities that build on those strategies. In thinking beyond the specifics of this group, I now have a model for investigating the learning strategies used by any group of learners and a place to start when deciding how to use that information to improve my practice.

I do still have questions about the strategies that were identified. One of the biggest has to do with the degree of influence that external forces have on strategy selection and use. Did my relaxed and open teaching style and the context it created foster use of socially oriented strategies over others? Did the fact that we all shared a common language other than English make consulting and translating and drawing first and second language comparisons a more feasible option? Is repetition and copying sentences a result of past educational experiences, as Humberto hinted when he said that he always had to copy what the teacher wrote because the schools in his country distributed no books to learners? It would be interesting to examine these questions more thoroughly, to develop a better

understanding of how language learning strategies in general are developed, supported, and used by adult ESL learners. ❑

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